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THE CURSE OF MY EARLY LIFE.

By AN EMANCIPATED SLAVE.



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THE CURSE OF MY EARLY LIFE.

THE curse of my early life was religious superstition, and I hold it accountable for many days and nights of unnecessary terror, for years of bad health, which had a lasting effect upon my constitution, for hundreds of lost joys, for a deleterious exercise of morbid thought and feeling, for an irreparable waste of misdirected effort, and for an irrecoverable forfeiture of advantages and opportunities. In reviewing the history of an individual or of a nation, it is of course impossible to affirm with certainty what results would have been produced if causes and influences had been different; but I know that I should have been happier, and I believe that I should have been better and more useful, if I had been brought up as a child of "the world," than I have been under the training of orthodox Christianity. I cannot, therefore, repress a feeling of bitter resentment against the system that kept me so long in hopeless bondage. I owe it no generous consideration, for it showed me none. It trampled ruthlessly upon my finest feelings and my best impulses; it repressed all useful ambition in me; and it warped and cramped my energies and my whole being. Entirely and for ever freed from its tyranny, my only duty in connection with it is to do the little that I can do to effect the enfranchisement of those who still remain in bondage to it. Perhaps a brief sketch of my religious history may have some influence in this direction. It may provoke the spirit

of inquiry, that generally leads to freedom, amongst those who suffer as I suffered, and it should at least warn parents of the danger of flaunting the terrors of religion before the keen sight and excitable imagination of their young children.

At a very early age I was indoctrinated with the mysteries and the horrors of the fashionable religion of my time and country. I cannot remember when I did not regard the Supreme Being as an awful Judge and almighty Avenger, from whose eternal resentment there seemed to me but a very small chance of escape for a naughty little boy. It is true that I was told that, by being washed in the blood of Christ, I should be made clean and acceptable to God ; but I could not in the least understand the process, and consequently I felt no confidence whatever in being so fortunate as to pass through it. But although I felt no confidence, I was glad to catch at this mysterious straw as my only chance of salvation, as a trifling but suggestive incident of my very early childhood will show. I distinctly remember as if it had been yesterday, although I think I could not have been more than six years old at the time, that on a certain Sunday afternoon I was giving free vent to my superfluous energy in various antics upon a featherbed that for some reason had been placed upon the floor of the nursery. Suddenly the awful thought occurred to me—it was a genuine awakening of conscience—that I was guilty of the heinous sin of Sabbath-breaking. For one moment I was paralysed with fear, but in the next I joyfully exclaimed—“ Oh ! never mind ; the blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth from all sin ;” and I toppled heels over head again on the featherbed.

Of course my childish ideas of the Supreme Being were extremely — almost ridiculously — anthropomorphic, and in describing them it is not easy to avoid the appearance of irreverence. It must be borne in mind, however, that the God of my childhood is no God to me

now, and that therefore I owe him no more reverence than I owe to any other false deity. Once I dreamed that this awful being appeared to me in person, advancing towards me down our garden path. In my terror I awoke before I knew the occasion of the awful visitation. But what chiefly impressed me, and indeed coloured my imagination for many years, was that this God of my dream appeared in the form and likeness of the keeper of the subscription gardens of the town in which I lived. This man was tall and of a stately bearing, and his aspect to me was not unfrequently one of great sternness; for I often incurred his displeasure by heedlessly running over his flowerbeds, as the paramount exigencies of hide-and-seek or hunt-the-hare impelled me, and, I must confess, by sometimes plucking his fruit in moments of strong temptation. He was regarded with great fear by all the juvenile frequenters of the gardens, one and all little depredators like myself. My conscience always sharply reproved me after I had yielded to the temptation of picking an apple which hung too invitingly within my reach, and I looked upon the keeper of the gardens as one who had a right to judge me severely. Hence it was that his image was represented in my dream, and, strange as it may seem, for many years afterwards the idea of God was inseparably connected in my mind with that image.

I do not think that my parents distressed me much with the teaching of the dreadful faith which they thought they were bound to believe. They were religious, but not "unco guid." They were too wise and too kind to have thrust the horrors of their religion very prominently upon the minds of their children, although they felt it to be their duty to teach us what they believed to be the religion of the Bible. But who knows where children pick up their religious ideas? Perhaps from servants, or from other children, or from their reading, or rather from all these. Happily in the

case of most healthy children the doctrines of orthodoxy take no great hold upon them, so strong is the revulsion of human nature against such morbid abominations. But weak and nervous children, and even some strong ones whose imaginations are peculiarly active, feel these doctrines much more keenly than the generality even of religious grown-up people. To these such a religion is a curse, as it was to me. Not that in my childhood I brooded continuously over the thoughts of death and hell : my temperament was too hopeful for that. In the daylight, or when amongst friends or playfellows, I was one of the merriest. It was only at night, or when listening to some horrible "sermon to the young," that "the fears of hell gat hold upon me." Then the anguish was often great, far more acute than any that I have since experienced. Many a night, when sleep refused to come to me, have I knelt up in my little bed tearfully praying that in God's infinite mercy I might not "awake and find myself in hell"—a charming phrase that I had learned from our Book of Family Prayers ; and intense was the feeling of relief when next morning I awoke to find myself alive and in the world. I do not know whether many children suffer as keenly as I did from the horrors of religion. No one knows what young people *do* suffer in this way. Children are extremely reserved in such matters, and I have no reason to suppose that my experience has been very peculiar. Thousands of children are as nervous and imaginative as I was, and are at the same time far more rigorously drilled in doctrinal religion. I suppose, therefore, that such children silently endure, as I did, mental agonies that their friends have no idea of. But what comfort could their friends give them if they knew of their sufferings ? The only permanent relief is that which is derived from unbelief, and that their orthodox friends cannot supply. At the best they can only endeavour to divert attention, and to occupy the mind in other directions, or to place the hopes of their

faith in the strongest lights ; but the first of these remedies can have no lasting effect, unless it be extended to the inculcation of indifference, and the second cannot satisfy a keen and logical mind.

I have said that my parents, although religious, were not "unco guid." But of course they deemed it necessary to "keep the Sabbath," and that their children should keep it too. Thus on the first day of every week all toys were carefully put away, and all story books of a secular character. In this latter respect it was not always easy to draw the line to a nicety, and we young ones sometimes got the benefit of the doubt. I remember that, as far as the scruples of my own conscience were concerned, I was quite satisfied that a book was a "Sunday book" if I could see the word "God" once or twice in every half-dozen pages. In those days there was very little of the entertaining Sunday magazine literature that now so cheerfully lightens the gloom of the Christian Sabbath. The lives and happy despatches of precociously pious infants were then in great favour amongst parents. This was not very cheerful reading ; for, apart from the depressing fact that these infant phenomena invariably died very young, their supernatural saintliness was perfectly exasperating. As for the large family Bible, although its numerous pictures somewhat secularized it in my estimation, there was something awful about it as the very fountain of all that was most gloomy in my life and in my ideas of a future existence. Besides this, it was extremely painful to me to allow my thoughts to dwell on the brutal tales of the Old Testament. The picture of the little children being devoured by bears roused in me any but what would have been supposed to be correct feelings. My indignation against Elisha was very bitter, and I dared not let myself think about God's responsibility, as the supposed sender of the bears, for a punishment so glaringly incommensurable with the sin of the sufferers. The story of the destruction of Korah, Dathan,

and Abiram, with their friends and families, for what was simply in their minds an act of civil rebellion, was even more horrible, if possible, and I could hardly repress the rebellious thought that God and Moses were the chief culprits in this terrible episode of Hebrew history. Similarly, in the atrocities committed against the Canaanites, my sympathies were uncontrollably with the invaded people, and against the robbers and murderers led by Moses and Joshua under the supposed direction of their cruel and unscrupulous God. So the Old Testament by turns terrified and disgusted me, and I hardly ever read it except as a class book. To the New Testament I turned with some sense of relief, but that was not without its awful mysteries and perplexing difficulties. On the whole, then, my Sunday reading was painful rather than pleasurable to me, and at the same time unprofitable. Whatever influence it had upon me was of a morbid nature, as indeed was that of the whole religious system of which it was a part. How I hated the "sacred day," though I dared not admit as much even to myself. "Thou shalt not be happy on the Sabbath," is the law that strict Christian parents promulgate against their unfortunate children. Many of my youthful companions were not even allowed to take a walk on that day, except to church or chapel and home again. My brothers and sisters and myself were not under this monstrous prohibition, but although we might go for a walk, running, as partaking of the nature of playing, was forbidden.

Children sometimes adopt very ingenious expedients to escape from the galling trammels of Sabbatarianism, and one of the most amusing that I can call to mind was related of some acquaintances of ours. These young people had, it seems, so far forgotten themselves as to indulge in a game of hide-and-seek on a Sunday. Their cries of "whoop" soon brought their mother up to reprove them. For a time all was quiet in the nursery; but soon the inmates of the parlour were astonished

by hearing loud calls of "Glory," and on going to inquire into the cause of this apparent enthusiasm they found that the game of hide-and-seek was still going on, after having been sanctified, as the children fondly hoped, by the substitution of a quasi-religious for a secular call.

But irksome as Sabbatarianism was to me, it was an essential part of my religion, and I no more thought of questioning its divine origin than I thought of doubting the inspiration of the Bible. So sacred was the day in my estimation, that I can remember being very much shocked by what seemed to me a lapse in its proper observance on the part of my parents. This consisted in sending to an inn for beer on Sunday, when staying at the sea-side. At home we had beer in casks, and I thought it no sin to have it drawn; but to purchase it on Sunday seemed to me a very different thing, and I thought it should have been procured in a bottle on Saturday evening. How many parents there are who prohibit innocent recreation to their children on Sunday, and yet do not hesitate to encourage Sunday trading rather than not have their ale fresh from the cask!

Before the iron of an unnatural faith had entered into my soul, I was accustomed to resist tyranny and wanton aggression as English boys are in the habit of resisting it. But after a time I came to see that Jesus distinctly inculcated the doctrine of non-resistance, and I felt that it was sinful to fight. With a keen sense of injustice and a burning hatred of oppression in any form, this Christian lesson was a very hard one for me to learn. I never did learn it with the perfectness that would have involved the turning of "the other cheek" when a blow had been struck—my blood was too hot for that—but I submitted to a great deal of insult, and got an undeserved reputation for meanness and cowardice in obedience to what I held to be a divine command. I have often thought since, that if I had my

school life to live over again, some of the bullies who perpetrated cowardly cruelties upon little boys should feel the strength of my arm. In schools, an immense amount of wrong-doing passes quite unnoticed by the authorities, so that if the boys do not protect themselves and their fellows against bullies and oppressors, the immoral doctrine of the immunity of criminals is virtually inculcated with the most mischievous consequences to all concerned. In after-life there is less need for individuals to protect themselves against wrong, because the strong arm of the law is in most cases a sufficient protection; but until something of the nature of a Court of Justice is established in every large school, boys, and girls too to a less extent, must take the law into their own hands. At present tale-bearing, that is, evidence of alleged wrongs, is discouraged both by masters and by public opinion, and the small and timid boy, who has no protector amongst his schoolfellows, commonly suffers under a harassing tyranny that has nothing to equal it in later life. I hold it to be not only not a virtue to submit to wrong, but a crime to allow wrong-doing to triumph—a crime not only against ourselves or any other victims whom we have the power to protect, but also against the evil doers themselves, by the encouragement that is thus given to an uncontrolled indulgence of their tempers and all the most brutal propensities of their nature.

It is astonishing to how small an extent the religious faith of most people is really a part of their very selves, permeating their whole life and conduct. For the most part men's religion is something which wraps them round indeed, but does not enter into them. It is more like a straight waistcoat constraining them from without than a vital principle directing them from within. This is because the vast majority of people have their religion put on them in their childhood, when they are incapable of analysing and comprehending it. As they get older they continue to wear it, become attached to

it, and would feel sadly at a loss without it. They are discouraged from all attempts towards an independent examination of it, and the business, cares, and pleasures of life distract their attention from it. In nine cases out of ten they are well contented to have their religious thinking done for them instead of by them. The great authority of fashion, and a commendable reverence towards parents and teachers, keep them in the groove that has been cut for them. They go through life, perhaps, without ever intelligently comprehending what it is that they profess to believe. So true is this, that if a preacher not suspected of heresy were to introduce the most unorthodox doctrines in his sermon, nine-tenths of any ordinary congregation would fail to find him out. It is within my own knowledge that the most distinct heresy has been preached to orthodox congregations without any protest being made, and that on the next Sunday doctrines diametrically opposed to that heresy have been received with the like tacit consent. Thus it is that the religion of an ordinary person has but little effect upon his daily life, and upon any opinions which he may form for himself. If all Christians were logical and consistent, the "peace-at-any-price" party would not be merely a small minority of the nation. All Christians would be Quakers, at least as far as the peace principles of that sect are concerned. In other respects they would be more like Ranters than Quakers. Moody and Sankey would produce no sensation, for the ordinary Christian would be a revivalist, with hardly a thought beyond "spending and being spent" in saving souls from the perdition to which the vast majority of mankind are said to be hastening.

The indifference of the good people around me was a great puzzle to me in my later youth and early manhood. How could they sit indulgently over their fruit and wine on Sunday afternoons when thousands of souls were perishing around them? How could they be

entirely absorbed in business throughout the week, leaving it to professional soul-savers to do all the work which they were quite competent to take part in? How could they spend their money on expensive luxuries and frivolous pleasures when churches and chapels required to be built, and Bibles and religious tracts might be spread broadcast over the world? Why was not every professed Christian, according to his or her ability, an active evangelist, a snatcher of brands from the burning? As for me, I dared not eat, drink, and be merry, as if this world were something better than a vale of tears, a scene of probation, a mere training-ground for heaven or hell. A word spoken, a tract given, a chapter of the Bible read, or a prayer uttered, might bring some indifferent child of the world to a sense of his need of Christ, and thus through God's blessing be the means of saving him from the wrath to come. What then if, through my want of zeal, that soul were lost to all eternity? What an awful responsibility! How utterly worthless, how contemptibly insignificant by comparison, was all else but the work of leading my fellow-men out of the broad road that leads to destruction into the narrow path that leads to eternal life. If I met or overtook anyone in the fields or quiet country roads, might not a few words well chosen cause him to think of his lost condition, and thus lead to his salvation? and if I neglected to say these few words, might not his everlasting damnation be upon my head? No matter if it were an impertinence to thrust my counsels thus upon him; let not mere politeness stand in the way of saving souls. In the busy streets such a course of proceeding was not always practicable, but there tracts might be given. Who could tell the effect of a single tract read in quiet? It might convert a worldly man, and he in his turn might be the means of converting hundreds of others. My pocket-money at that time was very limited, but I never spent a penny in self-indulgence without a twinge

of conscience. Would not that penny have bought a tract, and perhaps have saved a soul? How terrible if through my indulgence a fellow-creature should suffer eternal death! If I purchased any fruit, I did so with the excuse that it was necessary to my health. That I must preserve in order that I might do God's work; but to spend money in mere indulgences was a crime. From seven in the morning till eight in the evening my time was not at my own disposal, except on Sunday. But whatever time was my own I was bound to use in God's service, which, according to my conception, consisted almost solely in saving His creatures from the doom to which He had consigned them. Study to fit me better to do this work was, of course, not only allowable but a duty. Out-door exercise was also to be permitted on the score of health. But all mere pleasures were a waste of precious time. Should I attend a concert when I might be distributing tracts, reading the Bible in some low lodging-house, or assisting some amateur preacher at a cottage meeting? I was fond of music, and had some little taste for it; but what time was there for the cultivation of my tastes when souls were perishing around me? Thus my religious fervour warped and narrowed my nature, and I became morbid, prejudiced, and uncharitable. I lost sympathy with friends who were of the world worldly, or at least less zealous than myself in the only work that seemed to me to be 'much worth doing. Even philanthropic effort, that had only to do with men's temporal comfort or happiness, I regarded as insignificant by comparison; for what did it matter how men spent their brief span of life here when an eternity of bliss or torment was hanging in the balance? The "one thing needful" rendered all else comparatively trivial and unworthy of pursuit.

These views of mine were, no doubt, extreme, but they were only consistent with my faith as an orthodox Christian. Strongly as I now condemn them, and the

course of action which resulted from them, I still hold that, given the truth of my premises, my conclusions were unavoidable, and my conduct imperative.

But, firmly convinced as I was of my duty, and bitterly as my conscience condemned me when I shrank from its performance, my nature rebelled against my faith and what it led me to do. Well may the orthodox inveigh against the "natural man," for human nature is, happily, utterly at enmity with their morbid creed. A great deal of my work I did, therefore, with suppressed loathing. It was very painful to me to thrust myself upon those whom I desired to "convert," either by conversing with them, reading to them, or giving them tracts. At the conversing I was never good, and in leaving that branch of the work as far as possible to more eloquent and less delicate associates, I comforted myself with thinking that they were better suited to it than I was, and that I could be more useful in other ways. It was an immense relief to me when I took to contributing to the religious periodicals, for then I thought I had found my true vocation, and could with a clear conscience devote my spare time almost exclusively to it. But in order to write I found it requisite to read more and to think more, and reading and thinking are deadly foes to orthodox Christianity. I soon began to "weed" the tracts which I still distributed, occasionally burning those which revolted me by their coarseness, or shocked me by their impiously assumed familiarity with the unrevealed secrets of a future life. The leaven of free-thought had begun to work in me.

There is a period in the history of nearly every thoughtful person who has been brought up under the influence of orthodox Christianity, when the revulsion of feeling against the religion of his youth is almost too strong for endurance. For an enlightened Englishman of the nineteenth century to believe in the barbarous god of a barbarous people is an anomaly that can

only be preserved at the cost of great violence done to his moral and intellectual nature. His ideal god would be so infinitely superior to the ideal god of an Israelite of the time of even the latest of the Old Testament writers, that the acceptance of the latter must involve a great sacrifice, and it can only be from haziness of thought, or insincerity of profession, that he can voluntarily accept the lower and reject the higher ideal. I say voluntarily, because although he may be distinctly conscious that the God of the Israelites is a less perfect deity than even his own poor faculties enable him to conceive, he may yet be so completely a slave to the dogma of the inspiration of the Bible, as to feel bound to accept and worship this inferior deity, impossible as it may be to love him. In such a case, if he dared to let his mind have free play, and to put his thoughts into words, he would say:—"This is the Almighty God as portrayed in His own word, and faulty as He seems to me to be, He has the power to send me to hell if I do not worship Him." From such a terrible confession orthodox people usually escape by repressing all thought on the subject, and accepting their belief ready made. In a true sense this is not belief at all, but only indiscriminating acquiescence. Intelligent belief in two such contradictory presentments as the God of Joshua and the God of Jesus is simply impossible; yet orthodox Christians profess to believe in both.

In degrading bondage to this monstrous dogma of biblical inspiration I laboured long and painfully, and slow and painful too was my emancipation. Of course I felt no genuine love towards the instigator of wholesale murder and the vindictive inventor and preserver of an everlasting hell. Like most other Christians I feared God, and loved Christ. But I wanted to love God, and would have given anything to have been able to think better of Him! Great, then, was my joy when I first saw the scriptural authority of the dogma

of everlasting punishment called in question. At that time I should have rejected the denial of the dogma on any other ground than that it was unscriptural. By a studious collation of texts from the New Testament I became convinced that, judged only by the plain sense of the English version, there were at least as many passages against as for the doctrine; and, that being the case, I was glad to accept the teaching of those learned men who disputed the accuracy of the translation of *αἰώνιον* into *everlasting*. Eagerly did I read the works of the brave Robertson, the *once* brave Kingsley, and that chained eagle of deep and free thought, F. D. Maurice. Of these writers Robertson gave me by far the greatest satisfaction, the two others leaving me under a strong impression that they withheld themselves from a full confession of their opinions. But, unsatisfied as they left me, I owe them much for the encouragement to independent thought and inquiry which a study of their books afforded me at a critical period of my religious history. George Combe introduced me to the new world of natural religion, and superficial as I now regard many of his conclusions, his "Constitution of Man" was like a new gospel to me. Eagerly pursuing my course of inquiry, I read at intervals John Stuart Mill, Theodore Parker, F. W. Newman, Frances Power Cobbe, the "Essays and Reviews," Colenso, and a great deal that I have a less distinct remembrance of. Step by step free thought advanced upon me, my old faith retreating, though fighting till the last. Butler and Paley, Hamilton and Mansel, stimulated instead of setting at rest my increasing doubts. My emancipation was slow in its progress, but all the more complete at last. By the time that I first was introduced to "The Sling and Stone," I was in a fit state to enjoy its bold and uncompromising championship of religious freedom. I considered these sermons, and some of Mr Scott's excellent series of pamphlets, to be admirably suited to awaken thought in the minds of my

old religious associates, and so, using the post-office as my agency, I was still able to keep up to some extent my old habit of tract distributing. Rejoicing as I did with a great joy in my emancipation from the old slavery, should I not do my utmost to lead my former fellow slaves to the like freedom? But my efforts, as might have been expected, were frequently rejected with horror, and many a stern reproof and imploring appeal did I receive in return. In some cases it happened that those who at first all but cursed me, came in after years to rejoice with me in a common freedom from our old bondage; but the majority utterly refused to examine the evidences of their faith, as is the custom with the bigoted, and either mourned for me as for a lost sheep, or denounced me as an infidel.

In the early years of what I regard as my true "conversion," the usual persecution of free-thinkers was rampant and bitter. It has by no means yet subsided; but now that free thought is permeating the mass of educated people, the very number of the heretics renders them respectable, and their would-be oppressors have to moderate their religious rancour. There is, therefore, less excuse now than ever for that very numerous class of people who, although they have lost all sympathy with orthodox Christianity, still ostensibly cling to it, and, Sunday after Sunday, bow their heads in the Temple of Rimmon.